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## The Social Life of Firearms in Tokugawa Japan

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*Guns were surprisingly common in the villages of Tokugawa Japan. This article examines the 'social life' of firearms, focusing particularly on the hinterland of Edo. It traces the evolution of institutions governing peasants' possession of guns and examines prevailing conceptions of the uses of firearms. Building on the work of Tsukamoto Manabu, it argues that for much of the period guns were perceived to be farm implements rather than weapons per se: they were used to frighten or kill animals that damaged crops but not in conflicts among people. Starting in the 1840s, however, guns came to acquire an unequivocal character as weapons. This transformation came in response to anxiety over the proliferation of masterless samurai, unregistered commoners, and other disorderly elements, whose activities were seen as undermining the fabric of rural society.*

Guns are scary. They are instruments of violence, and with violence goes fear. In early modern Japan, however, firearms did not have a stable character and, consequently, they were not consistently frightening. Sometimes they were weapons, meant to kill men. Very scary. Sometimes they were farm implements, meant to chase off feral pigs. Scary for pigs. Sometimes they were emblems of status. Not so scary, except for those awed by symbols of petty exaltation. Sometimes it was hard to tell what they were for – to impress or intimidate, sure, but men or pigs? good guys or bad guys? – and that is when they were scariest of all.

My aim in this essay is to explore the social life of firearms in Tokugawa Japan. By 'social life', I mean that I will treat firearms as socially and politically situated objects whose function and meaning changed over time. I should note at the outset that I will be focusing on guns in the countryside – that is, those in the possession of peasants rather than samurai warriors. Although it is rarely mentioned even in the specialist literature, quite a lot of guns circulated in the peasant villages of Tokugawa Japan. Samurai had a lot of guns, too, with a social life of their own; but it was quite distinct from that of peasants' guns and is thus properly left for another occasion.<sup>1</sup>

A heavily abridged version of the story goes something like this. At the beginning of the Tokugawa period, the Japanese saw guns unambiguously as weapons. They were instruments of warfare, used in the battles for hegemony over the archipelago. Over time, however, as Tsukamoto Manabu has argued, firearms in the countryside lost their character as weapons and instead came to be seen as farm implements.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the Tokugawa period – say, around the 1840s and later – guns in the countryside came to reacquire the status of weapon, a trend that became particularly marked as the

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<sup>1</sup>On gun use by the military, see Rogers, 'The Development of the Military Profession in Tokugawa Japan'.

<sup>2</sup>Tsukamoto, *Shōrui o meguru seiji*, 9–95.

regime lurched toward collapse in 1868. The return of all firearms to the category of weapon was essentially completed in the late 1870s, when the new Meiji regime imposed strict restrictions on private gun ownership.

### Firearms as Farm Implements

In 1980, Noel Perrin characterized early modern Japan as having ‘given up the gun’.<sup>3</sup> His thesis was that the Tokugawa authorities made a conscious decision, after attaining hegemony over Japan, to forsake firearms and instead ‘revert to the sword’ as the weapon of choice in conflicts. Perrin does not argue that the Japanese eliminated guns altogether, but he does suggest that they deliberately allowed the technology to atrophy. The book is well intentioned, for Perrin hoped that the Japanese case might serve as a salutary example in a nuclear age. Unfortunately, his central thesis – that the shogunate consciously gave up guns and reverted to swords – is untenable, and for that reason (among others) the book is deeply flawed. Still, Perrin usefully reminds us that the extended Tokugawa peace created opportunities for firearms to develop a new character as something other than simple weapons.

European firearms were introduced into Japan in the middle of the sixteenth century and Japanese military men soon incorporated them into their forces. By the time Tokugawa Ieyasu established his shogunate in 1603 there were hundreds of thousands of firearms in circulation, some imported from Europe but many others made in Japan, at production centres in Sakai, Kunitomo village in Ōmi province, and other sites throughout the country.

Almost all of the firearms produced in Tokugawa Japan were matchlock muskets, which employ a small piece of cord, known as a match, to ignite the charge.<sup>4</sup> Matchlocks were virtually obsolete in Europe by the late seventeenth century, but they remained dominant in Japan throughout the Tokugawa period, even though the next generation of weapons, flintlocks, were known and occasionally produced. Saitō Tsutomu argues that matchlocks retained their appeal because they did not recoil as violently as flintlocks when shot, which made them better suited to the Japanese style of shooting single, precise shots rather than indiscriminate volleys.<sup>5</sup> In addition to muskets, Japanese gunsmiths produced handguns and small cannons in quantities dictated by the shogunate; Sakai and Kunitomo remained the main production centres throughout the early modern era. Sugawa Shigeo estimates (very roughly) that approximately 150,000 to 200,000 firearms were in circulation at any given time during the Tokugawa period.<sup>6</sup>

Guns were present in the countryside from the outset of the Tokugawa period. No doubt, many petty warriors rusticated during the Tokugawa settlement kept their firearms even after they were forced to give up their swords, for guns were not actively targeted for confiscation in Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s sword hunts in the 1580s and 1590s.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, more than half a century passed before the shogunate made its first concerted

<sup>3</sup>Perrin, *Giving Up the Gun*.

<sup>4</sup>On the manufacture and technology of Japanese matchlock muskets, see Wada, ‘Nihon no monozukuri no rekishi’.

<sup>5</sup>Saitō, ‘Hinawajū no zaishitsu to seisaku gihō’.

<sup>6</sup>Sugawa, *The Japanese Matchlock*, 43; Chaiklin, *Cultural Commerce and Dutch Commercial Culture*, 149–172. Since Sugawa bases his estimates on the samurai population, it is entirely possible that far higher numbers of guns circulated at any given time.

<sup>7</sup>Tsakamoto, *Shōrui o meguru seiji*, 17–18. See also Mizutani, *Edo wa yume ka*, 160–166, 231–234.

effort to regulate firearms in the countryside. Beginning in 1657, it issued a series of edicts calling for the confiscation of illicit weapons, a category that, by the late 1660s, would seem to have included almost every gun in a peasant's hands. At the same time, however, it allowed a range of exceptions that kept many peasants armed for the remainder of the Tokugawa period.

Most peasants in Tokugawa Japan earned their livelihoods by farming, of course, but in mountainous areas a minority supported themselves by hunting. Hunters, incidentally, engaged in hunting with official leave, but were not otherwise distinguished from the rest of the peasant population. Even those mountain villagers who did not hunt had to contend with animals that damaged crops, particularly boars and deer, and using guns was a good way to deal with them. In recognition of this reality, the authorities tempered their prohibitions of gun ownership with provisions for peasants to bear arms in defence of their livelihoods as hunters and mountain farmers. These exceptions to the rules effectively transformed rural weapons into farm implements, for guns were allowed only because they were the tools of peasant livelihoods.

Thus, for example, in 1676, the residents of Sanbagawa, a well-documented but otherwise unremarkable village in Kōzuke province (modern-day Gunma prefecture), requested an exemption to the shogunate's ban on guns, complaining that they needed firearms to protect their fields from the depredations of wild animals. Indeed, petitions from Sanbagawa throughout the course of the Tokugawa period are filled with laments about the hazards of farming in an area in which boars not only ruined crops but attacked farmers and even intruded into people's houses.<sup>8</sup> In making their requests, the residents of Sanbagawa followed the early Tokugawa practice of distinguishing between two categories of gun, *ryōshi teppō* and *odoshi teppō*. *Ryōshi teppō* were hunters' guns, while *odoshi teppō* were used to frighten animals; here I shall refer to them as farmers' guns. The categories refer solely to the intended use of the firearms: the guns themselves were indistinguishable. However, once labelled one way or the other, an individual firearm remained in the same category permanently, even through changes in ownership across generations.<sup>9</sup>

The institutions governing gun ownership changed after the death of the fifth shogun, Tsunayoshi, in 1709. His passing brought about the end of his so-called laws of compassion (*shōrui awaremi rei*), which had mandated severe punishments for the killing and mistreatment of animals, most notoriously dogs. It is important to note, however, that even at the height of Tsunayoshi's pooch-hugging fanaticism, hunters continued to kill animals with the blessings of the state.<sup>10</sup> Three months after Tsunayoshi's death, the shogunate issued an edict that for the first time allowed for the possibility that farmers might use live ammunition rather than blanks in their guns.<sup>11</sup> In 1722, the shogunate circulated a rather irately worded edict reminding lesser officials that the category of *odoshi teppō* – guns to frighten animals – no longer existed because peasants were

<sup>8</sup>Iizuka Kaoru-ke monjo H41-3-1 1-5 (1752), Gunma Prefectural Archives (on attacks on farmers), Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-4996 (1701/12) (on entry into houses).

<sup>9</sup>In gun registers weapons were listed according to the size of the ball, measured in *monme*. Peasants' guns, regardless of function, almost always fired 2–3 *monme* shot, which made them roughly equivalent to .440–.495 caliber Western guns. See Sugawa, *The Japanese Matchlock*, 11.

<sup>10</sup>In 1691, for example, Sanbagawa submitted a list of hunters who had the intendant's permission to engage in killing (*sesshō*): Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-4998 (1691/8/10). On Tsunayoshi and his laws of compassion, Tsukamoto, *Shōrui o meguru seiji*, is a stimulating survey; see pp. 205–225 on policies to protect dogs. See also Nesaki, *Shōrui awaremi no sekai*; Bodart-Bailey, *The Dog Shogun*, 128–160.

<sup>11</sup>Doc. 2529 (1709/4), Takayanagi and Ishii, *Ofuregaki Kanpō shūsei*, 1185.

expected to fire live ammunition rather than blanks. Finally, in a series of edicts announced between 1723 and 1729, the shogunate not only allowed peasants the use of firearms more or less year-round, but it even invited villages to request loans of as many guns as they thought they might need to deal with their pest animals. One edict went so far as to chastise trigger-shy villagers in one domain for failing to devote themselves to killing as many boars and deer as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Even after farmers received leave to kill animals, the shogunal authorities continued to distinguish between hunters' and farmers' guns. They did so because hunters and farmers used guns for fundamentally different reasons. Hunters made their living by killing; for them, guns were both essential tools of their livelihoods and symbols of their status as hunters. Farmers, conversely, used firearms expediently: the prevalence of pest animals in mountainous districts forced them to take up arms, but guns were not essential symbols of their status. For that reason, farmers' guns were always treated formally as articles of temporary use, held from year to year only as necessary – even when the years of necessity stretched into generations.

Neither the authorities nor the peasantry saw guns as ordinary items of property. Although hunters usually owned their own weapons, farmers formally borrowed their guns from the authorities from year to year. In some cases, at least, it appears that they really did borrow weapons provided by the samurai authorities, but in other instances the loan was merely nominal. In any event, the village as a unit was responsible for the various costs associated with maintaining farmers' guns, including transportation fees, repairs to damaged weapons, and the replacement of firearms destroyed by fire or otherwise rendered inoperable.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, hunters seem to have been individually responsible for the maintenance of their guns.<sup>14</sup>

After 1722, sources refer to farmers' weapons as 'two-season guns' (*nikiuchi teppō*) – meant to be used at the height of the growing season – or 'four-season guns' (*shikiuchi teppō*), which could be used nearly year-round. In Sanbagawa, all farmers' guns were of the four-season variety after 1720. Farmers holding four-season guns kept them from around the middle of the first month to some time in the eleventh or twelfth month. In principle, they were supposed to return them to the authorities every year, if only for a few days, but it is unlikely they did.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Docs. 2540 (1723/5), 2543 (1727/4), 2545 (1729/2), and 2544 (1727/4), Takayanagi and Ishii, *Ofuregaki Kanpō shūsei*, 1189–1191. The edicts were all duly received and acknowledged by Sanbagawa village officials: see Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1945 (n.d.).

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, a receipt for more than 11 *ryō* from the gunsmith Kunitomo Zenroku, addressed to the headman of Sanbagawa village, for repairing 35 guns, including seven that required new barrels. Appended to the receipt is a message from the intendant reminding the villagers to request use of the repaired guns by the twentieth day of the first month. Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-9400 (1729/6/24). For requests to make repairs to damaged firearms, see, for example, Iizuka-ke monjo P8215-4995 (1703/2), and Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-4983 (1709/8).

<sup>14</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo H41-3-1- *wa*-36 (1759/12).

<sup>15</sup>The last extant reference to guns being returned to Edo from Sanbagawa is in 1720: Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-6864 (1720/4/2). The shogunate made allowances for the transport of firearms through falconry grounds on their way to and from Edo, but the relevant edict does not refer to annual transfers of weapons. See Doc. 1771 (1768/9), Takayanagi and Ishii, *Ofuregaki Tenmei shūsei*, 458–459. The edict was received in Sanbagawa about two months after it was issued: Iizuka-ke monjo P8215-1415 (1768/11). In 1839, the Sanbagawa headman assured the intendant that all four-season guns in the village would be delivered to the headman's house for safe-keeping at the end of the eleventh month each year: Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1496 (1839/1).

Whether hunters or farmers, peasant gun holders did not enjoy the alienation rights over their guns usually associated with personal property in early modern Japan. Not only did they need permission to repair or replace inoperable weapons, but they required the approval of both village and samurai authorities when transferring their guns – or, rather, their gun licences, wooden tags that represented the right to hold a firearm – to heirs or others.<sup>16</sup> These restrictions reflected the fact that the village's corporate interest in firearms took precedence over the individual or household interests of gun holders. In that sense, guns were similar to the tools owned by master craftsmen in pre-Revolutionary France.<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding these restrictions, peasants sometimes illegally pawned their gun licences in times of need.<sup>18</sup>

The shogunate formally asserted ultimate authority over the disposition of individual guns, but as a practical matter, control seems to have moved to the villages by the early eighteenth century – that is, at about the same time as farmers got leave to use live ammunition in their guns. Thus, in a petition to the intendant (*daikan*), dated 1697, the Sanbagawa headman complained that eight or nine of the village's 23 guns were useless, some because they were damaged, but others because their holders were too old to make good use of them or had died without an adult male heir. The village was unable to reassign the usable weapons because it was bound by the shogunate's prohibition of the lending of firearms.<sup>19</sup> In the 1720s and later, however, the village asserted its corporate interest in guns directly and promptly oversaw the transfer of dead or incapacitated gun holders' licences to other villagers.<sup>20</sup> In 1730, Sanbagawa village authorities even stripped a farmer named Sōhei of his four-season gun on the grounds that he was not pulling his weight in the village's perennial battle against deer and boars.<sup>21</sup>

In Sanbagawa, the number of hunters' guns remained stable at eight throughout the Tokugawa period, while the number of registered farmers' guns rose gradually from 15 in the 1680s to 60 in the 1850s. Surviving records do not explain every increase, but it is clear that the intendants occasionally accepted the village's requests for additional firepower to deal with deer and boars. Such was the case in 1708, when the villagers bought 20 new guns, which the intendant then 'lent' to them.<sup>22</sup> However, some apparent increases in the number of firearms in the village may be illusory: since damaged or destroyed firearms remained registered permanently, approved replacement weapons appear on the registers as net additions. Moreover, other increases are probably attributable to the authorities' decision to recognize and therefore register hidden guns, a topic to which we shall now turn.

<sup>16</sup>A hunter's licence tag has been preserved in Arikawa Hiroshi-ke monjo H0-6-2 3-*bangai* 3 (n.d.) Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>17</sup>Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*.

<sup>18</sup>Fueki Shirōemon-ke monjo P8418-354-37 (*tatsu*/2), Gunma Prefectural Archives, is a draft of a pawn note for 2 *ryō* in gold. Hirano, 'Odawara han ni okeru teppō aratame ni tsuite', 74–79, describes what was apparently the widespread pawning of guns in the Odawara area.

<sup>19</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-8982 (also catalogued as H41-3-1- L1) (1697/10); the village expressed similar problems four years later: Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-4996 (1701/12).

<sup>20</sup>For an example of the village's assumption of a dead farmer's license, see Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-5005 (1722/1). Failing eyesight led another farmer to cede his licence: Iizuka-ke monjo H41-3-1 1-3 (1776/1). For an example of the village assisting in the sale of a hunting gun, see Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-6838 (1729/4) and Iizuka-ke monjo H41-3-1 1-1 (1729/8).

<sup>21</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-10027 (1730/12/28).

<sup>22</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1441 (1717/5).



## Hidden Guns

For the historian, seeing the headman of Sanbagawa village dutifully report, in duplicate or triplicate, the transfer of a gun licence from Peasant A to Peasant B, and seeing him do it time and again, leaves one impressed with the thoroughness of Tokugawa bureaucracy, its salmon run of petitions, reports, and registers from the countryside forever swimming upstream against the flow of ‘thou shalts’ and ‘thou shalt nots’ from Edo. It would be a mistake, however, to see in the mass of paperwork evidence of an omniscient state. More than knowledge, the Tokugawa authorities wanted order, and an orderly show of compliance with their often complex and confusing rules was enough to satisfy them that their system of ‘benevolent rule’ was working. They responded matter-of-factly to even systematic evasions of the rules, so long as the monkey business helped in its way to preserve order and stability.

Thus, during a series of inspection tours conducted between 1838 and 1840, shogunal officials discovered 1,666 ‘hidden guns’ (*kakushi teppō*) in the Kantō countryside, almost all of them hidden in plain sight.<sup>23</sup> These weapons represented the response of the headmen of at least 498 villages – Sanbagawa among them – to the practical difficulties of complying with a system that did not provide a regular means to replace old or damaged weapons, and generally lacked the flexibility desired by peasants besieged by hungry ungulates.<sup>24</sup>

The campaign against hidden guns apparently began in response to nagging concerns that masterless samurai, unregistered commoners (*mushuku*), and other disorderly elements – ‘bad guys’ (*warumono* or *akutō*) – were arming themselves in the pursuit of unlawful activities. The term ‘bad guy’, colloquial and amorphous, captures the character of the disorderly elements that tormented the rural Kantō. Officials assumed, somewhat unfairly, the criminality of masterless samurai and unregistered commoners, but otherwise never defined precisely who counted as a bad guy: they took it for granted that peasants would know a bad guy when they saw him.

Officials also assumed that the condition of being a bad guy was somehow contagious: every young man was a potential bad guy in the making. Accordingly, almost as worrisome as the use of firearms in crime was the prospect that peasant youths might be corrupted into emulating bad guys’ behaviour, including their use of firearms. Over the years between 1805 and 1839, Edo issued and reissued edicts forbidding peasants to engage in martial arts, including gun practice, and urging them not to deport themselves like masterless samurai or the notoriously rough Edo firefighters.<sup>25</sup>

The concern for peasant morality perhaps explains the logic behind the actual conduct of the campaign. That is, although its ostensible goal was to disarm masterless samurai and their ilk, the authorities made few efforts to go after bad guys and their guns directly. Instead, they sought an accurate count of firearms in the countryside, with the aim of removing excess weapons from circulation and thereby drying up the pool of guns potentially available to bad guys. In other words, if peasants had just the number of

<sup>23</sup>The number of ‘hidden guns’ is calculated from figures in Takei, ‘Tenpō kakushi teppō no tekihatsu to sono rekishiteki igi’, 47–48.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. The inspectors found ‘hidden guns’ in 498 Kantō villages, mostly in the mountainous provinces of Shimotsuke (277 villages) and Kōzuke (79 villages).

<sup>25</sup>Doc. 6290 (1805), Takayanagi and Ishii, *Ofuregaki Tenpō shūsei*, 2: 742–743; Sugi, *Kinsei no chiiki shakai to zaison bunka*, 268; Takei, ‘Tenpō kakushi teppō no tekihatsu to sono rekishiteki igi’, 39–40.

firearms they actually needed, they would not be tempted to sell or pawn their weapons.<sup>26</sup>

The investigation of hidden guns was conducted by members of the Kantō Regulatory Patrol (*Kantō torishimari shutsuyaku*), a special police force created by the shogunate in 1805. The patrolmen enjoyed the extraordinary right to travel throughout the Kantō region without regard to domainal boundaries in pursuit of masterless samurai, gamblers, and gangsters. In addition to their police powers, after 1827 they also oversaw the operation of ‘reform leagues’ (*kaikaku kumiai*) – that is, groups of up to several dozen villages formed to keep order and revitalize rural society.<sup>27</sup>

In preparation for the gun inspection, the Kantō Regulatory Patrol ordered Sanbagawa and other villages in its reform league to compile draft registers of all firearms in their possession, licensed or not, in the intercalary fourth month of 1838.<sup>28</sup> The order included a promise that peasants would not be punished for reporting their unlicensed firearms.<sup>29</sup> Sanbagawa’s register, submitted two months later, lists 81 guns (see Figure 1 below).<sup>30</sup> Let us examine the register closely, for although it is not in fact a complete listing of the village’s guns, it does illuminate the intersection between the two dominant impulses of village bureaucracy in early modern Japan: to assiduously follow rules and to brazenly break them.

The register begins familiarly enough, with a listing of eight hunters’ guns and 33 ‘borrowed’ (*haishaku*) four-season guns. However, the notations reveal that five of the hunters’ guns and 11 of the four-season guns are ‘damaged’ (*jutsū*) and therefore ‘useless’ (*yō ni tachigatashi*). Each of the useless weapons is paired with an additional gun under the same peasant’s name and marked as ‘owned’ (*shoji*). In each of these cases, the original, damaged firearm remained the one linked to the official licence: when the

Gun type	Number
Hunters’ ( <i>ryōshi</i> )	8
Four-season (borrowed) ( <i>shikiuchi</i> <i>haishaku</i> )	33
Owned ( <i>shoji</i> )	16
Owned (to frighten animals) ( <i>shoji</i> <i>odoshi</i> )	24
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>81</b>

FIGURE 1. Firearms in Sanbagawa village, 1838.

<sup>26</sup>Takei, ‘Tenpō kakushi teppō no tekishatsu to sono rekishiteki igi’, 44.

<sup>27</sup>Sakurai, ‘Kantō torishimari shutsuyaku to kaikaku kumiai mura’, 141–166. See also Howell, ‘Hard Times in the Kantō’.

<sup>28</sup>Other areas were ordered to compile registers at the same time. For one covering a number of villages in northern Kōzuke province, see Kobayashi Sōkichi-ke monjo H10-1-1 1/*kari*-3 (1838/7), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>29</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-5065 (1838/9).

<sup>30</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo H41-3-1- L89 (1838/9). This document is a copy (*hikae*) of the register kept by the village headman, but it bears the seal of every gun holder in Sanbagawa. It is addressed to officers of the Kantō Regulatory Patrol, with a copy to the shogunal intendant.



headman submitted his annual reports, registers, and other correspondence, he referred to these useless originals rather than their privately obtained replacements. In addition to the 41 licensed guns and 16 unlicensed replacements, the register lists an additional 24 firearms as being ‘owned for frightening animals’ (*shoji odoshi* in the shorthand of the document). These it describes as having been ‘owned in secret’ (*nainai nite shoji*) as a necessary response to the problem of deer and boars. Thus, even within the category of privately obtained firearms, the register distinguishes between those bought as stand-ins for broken-down originals and those that took the village well beyond its approved quota.

On the fifteenth day of the third month, the villagers headed to an inn in the post town of Fujioka to present their firearms, licence tags, and one ball of shot each for inspection by one of the Kantō patrolmen. Somehow the number of guns in Sanbagawa had risen from 81 to 100 in the nine months since the last register was compiled; the additional 19 weapons probably represent the fruits of the authorities’ repeated threats of reprisals.<sup>31</sup> The number of registered firearms and unlicensed replacements remained at 57, while the number of illicitly owned, over-quota guns rose from 24 to 43.<sup>32</sup> The patrolman immediately returned the regularly licensed hunters’ and four-season guns – 41 in all – to their bearers and nominally confiscated the remaining 59 weapons. However, when he left the area two days later he took with him only 24 of the confiscated guns, all of which were deemed inoperable. The other 35 guns were entrusted to the village headman and other local officials, ostensibly pending the receipt of further instructions from the inspector’s superiors concerning the disposition of the firearms.<sup>33</sup>

Following in the wake of the inspector’s visit was a sheaf of reports and petitions. Peasants without any guns at all solemnly swore that they were not holding back any weapons.<sup>34</sup> Owners of 13 of the 24 confiscated illicit weapons declared that their guns had always been so badly damaged – just the barrels remained in most cases – that in fact they had *never* been fired.<sup>35</sup> And most important, the village requested through the head of its reform league that Edo issue four-season-gun licences for the 35 nominally confiscated weapons.<sup>36</sup>

Where did all of these ‘hidden’ guns come from? The headman of Sanbagawa professed not to know.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps if he had rummaged through his files he would have found a receipt for the sale of 11 used guns one of his ancestors had bought for 16 *ryō* on behalf of the village in 1759.<sup>38</sup> In any case, firearms certainly circulated widely in the late Tokugawa period – some through buying and selling, others through theft. The shogunate tried to manage the circulation of guns by establishing production quotas for officially licensed gunsmiths and then buying up all the output of their workshops,<sup>39</sup> but inevitably there was a certain amount of seepage. For example, a Kōzuke peasant sold

<sup>31</sup>Indeed, a count made within the village seven days before the official inspection initially revealed 94 weapons, but six additional ‘owned’ guns turned up when local officials did a recount. Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1511 (1839/3/8).

<sup>32</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-2275 (1839/3).

<sup>33</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-2275 (1839/3); Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1429 (1839/3); and Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-5062 (1839/3).

<sup>34</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1444 (1839/3).

<sup>35</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1419 (1839/3).

<sup>36</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1418 (1839/4) and Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1512 (1839/3).

<sup>37</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-5065 (1838/9).

<sup>38</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-6866-1 (1759/1/20).

<sup>39</sup>Chaiklin, *Cultural Commerce and Dutch Commercial Culture*, 154–155.

his gun in 1846 to an unregistered commoner, who then brandished the weapon in a drunken rage.<sup>40</sup> In 1861, hunters in another Kōzuke village were urged to keep their guns securely locked up because of reports that masterless samurai and unregistered commoners had been breaking into houses to steal guns.<sup>41</sup> Finally, rural gunsmiths manufactured and refurbished a certain number of weapons; the scale or the legal status of these operations is not clear, but judging from the plans that have survived in the papers of Arikawa Namiemon – a craftsman who lived in the interior of Kōzuke province and held licences from both the shogunate's official gunsmith, Akagari Sōemon, and the head of the guild of blacksmiths, Mishina Iga-no-kami – the technical level seems to have been quite high.<sup>42</sup>

The outcome of the campaign against 'hidden guns' in Sanbagawa appears to have been typical. Elsewhere, too, inspectors confiscated guns that were too badly damaged to use anyway and left previously unregistered weapons with village officials, who promptly requested that they be recognized as four-season or hunters' guns.<sup>43</sup> The campaign was successful insofar as it seems to have given Edo a better sense of the number of functional weapons in the countryside, and it made more-nearly-honest men out of hundreds of village officials. It did not disarm any masterless samurai, unregistered commoners, and other dicey fellows – but that seems not to have been the policy's goal in any case.

Guns were still farm implements in 1839. Whether they belonged to hunters or were entrusted to farmers – indeed, whether they were licensed or hidden – they were instruments of peasant livelihood, meant to kill game or protect fields against pests. They were not understood primarily as instruments of violence against other people. Of course, everyone understood the lethal potential of guns. Aside from the obvious – what is lethal for pigs is lethal for people – the idea that peasants might keep guns in peacetime to safeguard themselves from human threats had precedent going back at least to the end of the seventeenth century, when the shogunate declared that villages might request permission to keep a gun for self-protection (*yōjin teppō*).<sup>44</sup> But it appears that few such licences were ever issued before the last decades of the Tokugawa era.

People did not shoot one another in the villages of early modern Japan. They brawled, they flew into drunken rages, they killed each other in fits of passion and stupidity, they rose by the thousands in violent protest. But they did not shoot each other, even when it might have seemed reasonable to do so, as, for example, when a group of bad guys overran the home of one Isakichi in Ryūmai village in 1864: someone apparently used a gun to sound a distress signal, but did not fire again even as the fighting escalated to the point that one of the villagers who had responded to the signal was killed and another injured by sword wounds at the bad guys' hands.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the only death by gunshot I

<sup>40</sup>Takakusaki Shōtarō-ke monjo H88-3-1 1-22 (1846/9/19), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>41</sup>Kurosawa Kanji-ke monjo H45-6-2 1-131 (1861/12), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>42</sup>The licence from Akagari Sōemon: Arikawa-ke monjo H0-6-2①/222 (1854/4/20) and the associated tag, Arikawa-ke monjo H0-6-2 3/bangai 2 (1854/4/20); on his relationship with Mishina Iga, see two undated letters, Arikawa-ke monjo H0-6-2 1-39 and H0-6-2 1-43, and formal rules of conduct for blacksmiths: Arikawa-ke monjo H0-6-2 1-31 (n.d.). Gun blueprints: Arikawa-ke monjo H0-6-2 2-87 (*kinotoushi* [1805 or 1865]/5), H0-6-2 2-88 (n.d.), and Arikawa-ke monjo H0-6-2 3/bangai 4 (1823/5).

<sup>43</sup>Sanbagawa's experience with the inspection was similar to that of villages in the Odawara domain, as described by Takei, 'Tenpō kakushi teppō no tekihatsu to sono rekishiteki igi'.

<sup>44</sup>Doc. 2525 (1687/12), Takayanagi and Ishii, *Ofuregaki Kanpō shūsei*, 1182–1184.

<sup>45</sup>Ōtake Tsuneshichi-ke monjo H4-48-3 1-72 (1864/5), Ōtake-ke monjo H4-48-3 1-72 (1864/5), and Ōtake-ke monjo H4-48-3 1-78 (1864/5), Gunma Prefectural Archives. The distress signal is described as

have found in Kōzuke province is the accidental shooting of a man by a hunter in 1836.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, as Yabuta Yutaka has shown, before the 1840s, peasants throughout Japan even refused to use firearms during violent protests. They might carry guns to sound signals, but very rarely, if ever, used them as weapons.<sup>47</sup> Although the evidence is admittedly spotty, these examples all suggest that guns occupied a conceptual category distinct from weaponry in the minds of Tokugawa peasants.

### Firearms Recast as Weapons

Eventually peasants changed their minds about the nature of guns. Bad guys helped. Villagers confronted with disorder increasingly chose to take matters into their own hands. When a group of 23 bad guys was spotted near Kashiwagi village, the headman sent an urgent circular to the surrounding communities, calling on his neighbours to arm themselves with guns and other weapons and join a posse to go after the gang.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, residents of a group of ten villages in northwestern Kōzuke took it on themselves to hunt for bad guys in their area. Their efforts were rewarded when they ambushed a group of seven fishy characters at the Mikuni pass on the road to Echigo province. One of them – a gambler from Musashi province – apparently ‘committed suicide’ (talk about fishy) rather than be taken into custody, but the rest were duly delivered to the authorities.<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that in neither of these cases did the bad guys do anything directly to provoke the peasants’ vigilante actions.

There is ample evidence that peasants were growing tired of the harassment they faced from masterless samurai and other disorderly elements, who descended on villages to gamble, carouse, and extort money, food, and liquor. As early as 1812, a group of 20 villages in Kazusa province pleaded with the shogunate to do something to improve security in the face of incursions by gangs of masterless samurai. The villagers did not take up arms, but they did set up iron booby traps in an attempt to impede the bad guys’ progress through the region.<sup>50</sup> The incident in Ryūmai village just mentioned occurred in the midst of a four-month-long crime wave, in which bad guys like Sennoshin and his gang, armed with swords (*nagawakizashi*), spears, and – yes – guns, terrorized Ryūmai and surrounding communities to the point that peasants were afraid to go to their fields to work.<sup>51</sup>

The authorities had trouble coming up with a consistent response to the peasants’ pleas for help. At times, they were tempted to blame the victims, as in an edict circulated

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a *narimono*, which generally refers to a gun. Isakichi eventually paid compensation of 30 *ryō* and 20 *ryō*, respectively, to the families of the dead and injured men. Immediately after the attack he offered an apology to the victims’ families: Satō Kyūei-ke monjo H4-48-2 1-58 (1864/1/7). The bad guys appear to have gotten away unpunished. None of the documents offers a reason for the bad guys’ attack.

<sup>46</sup>Kawakami kuyū monjo H75-16-1 1-77 (1836/9), Gunma Prefectural Archives. For a similar case in Echizen province in 1802, see Asayama Rōgū, *Shisō zasshiki* (n.d.), fascicle 69, MS, National Archives of Japan.

<sup>47</sup>Yabuta, *Kokuso to hyakushō ikki no kenkyū*. See also Uchida, ‘Emono kara takeyari e’. For a discussion of weaponry in protest, see Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, 89–106.

<sup>48</sup>Yamada Matsuo-ke monjo P8217-1551-15 (n.y./9/9), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>49</sup>Kawakami kuyū monjo H75-16-1 1-64 (1864/3).

<sup>50</sup>Kumiai nijukkason ren’inchō’ (1812/7), in Sanbu-chō Shi Hensan Iinkai, *Sanbu-chō shi: Shiryōhen: Kinseihen*, 244–246. For a discussion of the petition, see Sakurai, ‘Kantō torishimari shutsuyaku to kaikaku kumaiimura’.

<sup>51</sup>Mutō Bunji-ke monjo P8806-6750 (1864/6), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

in 1864, which attributed the recent crime wave to lily-livered peasants who failed to report sightings of bad guys for fear of reprisals.<sup>52</sup> Just the following year, however, they told villages to do whatever possible to defend themselves from external threats, starting with the establishment of security patrols.<sup>53</sup> One community responded to this order by organizing villagers to come running with (unspecified) weapons (*emono*) in an emergency; two men were injured (and compensated by village officials) when they responded to an attack of bad guys in the first month of 1866.<sup>54</sup> Yet when the Ashikaga domain requested permission in 1867 to distribute 35 firearms to provide security to six Musashi villages non-contiguous with the rest of the domain (*tobichi*), the shogunate turned the request down on the grounds that bad guys would probably just steal the weapons, thus exacerbating the security issues in the region.<sup>55</sup>

Amid this turmoil, a number of village headmen in Kōzuke and Musashi provinces proposed in the tenth month of 1863 that peasants – not just any peasants, but upstanding types such as themselves – be armed and trained to defend their communities from the incursions of bad guys.<sup>56</sup> We are simple people, the petition stated, content to devote our energies to farming and other means of livelihood. Our simple character helps us get by on our poor land, but it has not prepared us to stand up to the unregistered commoners and other bad guys who have been harassing our communities. Indeed, our fear has encouraged them to expand their ranks. Now Japan is in a volatile state: foreigners have come to the country and politics are in flux. If a crisis were to occur, the bad guys would surely take advantage of the situation and band together to inflict who knows what manner of terror on the countryside. The petition therefore proposed posting rotating groups of peasants – village headmen and other community leaders or their younger, non-heir sons – at the intendant's headquarters at Iwahana village. These men would receive military training in the arts of swordsmanship, *jūjutsu*, and musketry at a facility to be built at the headquarters with the donations of well-to-do peasants. Once trained, the men would maintain security in the countryside, either on their own or as auxiliaries to regular samurai troops.

The authorities did not go for the plan as presented, but they did act on the petition. Rather than offer training to village officials and their sons, the intendant mustered peasants who already knew how to use firearms – that is, hunters and a smattering of four-season-gun-holding farmers. A roster lists two dozen gunmen from 20 villages, along with miscellaneous supervisors and hangers-on. It appears that most of the

<sup>52</sup>Iyoku Mitsuo-ke monjo P8003-1552 (1864/8), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>53</sup>Yamada Mitsutoshi-ke monjo H60-10-4 2-76 (1865/6/4), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>54</sup>Shinoya Rokurō-ke monjo H60-14-1 1-69 (1866/8), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>55</sup>Takei, 'Tenpō kakushi teppō no tekishatsu to sono rekishiteki igi', 50–51.

<sup>56</sup>I have found numerous copies of the petition in the Gunma Prefectural Archives, from villages throughout Kōzuke province. The text of the petition states that it is from villages in Musashi as well, but I have not had an opportunity to search the Saitama Prefectural Archives for copies; presumably the Musashi villages would have been in the northern part of the province, close to the Iwahana intendency. The records that survive are copies of the petition kept for the village headmen's files. It is not clear how many villages actually signed on to the petition in the end. The text paraphrased here is Katsuta Takeo-ke monjo P8425-91 (1863/10), Gunma Prefectural Archives, but the wording of the other versions is the same: among others, see Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-8144 (1863/10); Fueki-ke monjo P8418-529 (1863); Yamada Matsuo-ke monjo H41-4-1 - 1898 (1863); Ōto kuyū monjo H62-14-1 7-814 (n.d. [1863]), Gunma Prefectural Archives; Amada Sakari-ke monjo P8105-967-4 (n.d. [1863]), Gunma Prefectural Archives; Kanbe Kanetaka-ke monjo P8213-7612 (1863), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

men patrolled the vicinity of the intendancy and some may have studied artillery technique.<sup>57</sup>

Soon the shogunate was using peasant gun holders for more than guard duty at the intendancy. Officials ordered villages to provide gunmen to support their effort to contain the Tenguō insurrection of 1864, in which radical samurai from the Mito domain, acting in the name of loyalty to the imperial institution, confronted the shogunate over its ties with the Western powers.<sup>58</sup> The Tenguō rebels attempted to march on the imperial capital of Kyoto via Shimotsuke and Kōzuke provinces. On the fourteenth day of the eleventh month the Kantō Regulatory Patrol ordered reform leagues to muster all gun-holding peasants in their villages, with instructions to have their guns and ammunition at the ready to mobilize on short notice.<sup>59</sup> In the end, the rebels were contained with little fighting and almost no bloodshed – just as well, perhaps, for the headmen of Sanbagawa and neighbouring villages, who duly mobilized the gun-holding residents of their communities – 67 men in all – only to send them off in the wrong direction.<sup>60</sup> Two years later, in the sixth month of 1866, peasants in the vicinity of Sanbagawa were mobilized again, this time to help defend the Iwahana intendancy against a possible attack from participants in the massive Bushū uprising, an economically motivated peasant protest movement that was spreading north through Musashi province.<sup>61</sup> The attack never came and the peasants were sent home after just three days, but the residents of Sanbagawa had to pick up more than 47 *ryō* in expenses related to the mobilization.<sup>62</sup>

In the meantime, run-of-the-mill bad guys – gamblers and gangsters – remained a headache for peasants and the authorities alike. In 1861 the shogunate invited peasants throughout the Kantō to protect themselves and their communities against bad guys with whatever weapons they had on hand, including bamboo spears and guns, registered or not. Shoot first, do the paperwork later, the authorities said in an astonishing abdication of their privileges and responsibilities as members of a warrior class.<sup>63</sup> In 1865, officials distributed an edict that added a comforting veneer of bureaucracy to essentially the same impulse. Villages were ordered to identify able-bodied men to serve as an ad hoc emergency response force under the command of the headman. The men were told to keep their guns, bamboo spears, and other weapons always at the ready in case of an irruption of bad guys. They were charged with apprehending the bad guys if possible, or at the very least with holding them at bay long enough for the Kantō Regulatory Patrol to arrive. In the true spirit of micromanaging Tokugawa bureaucracy, the edict included instructions concerning the banners each village force would display and pointers on the preparation of *bentō* lunches.<sup>64</sup> In addition to these self-managed

<sup>57</sup>Several copies of the roster survive: Karasawa Himeo-ke monjo H60-13-1 3-15 (1863/12), Gunma Prefectural Archives; Shinbo Hikonori-ke monjo H60-11-1 1-100 (1861 [sic]/12), Gunma Prefectural Archives (the document is a later copy, hence the mistaken date); and Mogi Ikashige-ke monjo H43-11-1 1-161 (1863/12), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>58</sup>Koschmann, *The Mito Ideology*.

<sup>59</sup>Kanbe-ke monjo P8213-3835 (*ne* [1864]/11/14). According to Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-1411 (1864/9), Sanbagawa village promised to mobilize two hunters and 12 four-season-gun holders in response to this order.

<sup>60</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo H41-3-1-V6-3 (1864/11/19). The number of men is from Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-571 (1864/12).

<sup>61</sup>Sippel, 'Popular Protest in Early Modern Japan'.

<sup>62</sup>Iizuka-ke monjo P8214-2153 (1866/12).

<sup>63</sup>Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, 98–101.

<sup>64</sup>Multiple copies of essentially the same document survive in the archives; among others, see Nakan Hitoshi-ke monjo H74-9-27 2-3 (1865/11), Gunma Prefectural Archives; Inoue Kaname-ke monjo H71-4-5 2-28 (n.d. [1865]), Gunma Prefectural Archives; Shinbo-ke monjo H60-11-1 1-100 (n.y. [1865]/11/



efforts, peasants were recruited from time to time to assist members of the Kantō Regulatory Patrol in their pursuit of bad guys; in at least one case villagers were instructed to bring their guns and shoot to kill if fugitive bad guys came their way.<sup>65</sup>

The shogunate's encouragement notwithstanding, there is little evidence that peasants actually went about shooting bad guys. This is not surprising. Peasants may not have believed the reassuring rhetoric giving them leave to use deadly force. They may have feared reprisals from the bereaved members of a dead bad guy's gang. Or perhaps they were simply loath to take a life, even a scoundrel's. In any case, the absence of killing highlights an irony: peasants wanted to use guns to kill animals and scare people, while the shogunate preferred that they scare animals and kill people.

The deputizing of gun-holding peasants to respond to disorder was not a phenomenon limited to the Kantō region or territories under the shogunate's direct control. Abe Hideki has written on the market for firearms in the Hiroshima domain. In a series of orders issued in 1863 and 1864 the domain completely reversed its longstanding restrictions on peasants' gun-holding. In fact, it urged peasants to arm themselves and took steps to encourage the emergence of a lively market for firearms in the domain. The domain hoped to organize formal peasant militias, whose members would be posted both along the Inland Sea coast – to protect the domain from possible foreign invasion – and inland – to protect the domain from the depredations of bad guys. However, the arming of the peasantry extended well beyond the confines of the peasant militias. In one village Abe studied there was just one farmer's gun in 1829, whereas by 1864 the number had jumped to 82. Even allowing for the possibility that local peasants had a number of 'hidden guns' before 1864, without question there was a huge influx of weapons into rural Hiroshima.<sup>66</sup>

Things continued in this vein through the final, tumultuous years of the Tokugawa regime and indeed for a while after its collapse at the beginning of 1868. Thus, in the eighth month of that year we find officials in the post station of Nakanojō offering the services of five local hunters as the armed members of a volunteer security brigade, the Yūshi Anmintai, standing ready to assist in the event of an emergency – but assist whom, the outgoing Tokugawa authorities or the incoming Meiji ones, they do not say.<sup>67</sup> The residents of another village were less ambivalent: on hearing news of the proclamation of imperial rule, they drafted a compact in which they vowed to each other to maintain order during the transition by doing everything in their power to rein in the activities of bad guys.<sup>68</sup>

The Meiji state kept the categories of hunters' and farmers' guns in place for a time – not to get help in controlling bad guys, but rather so that peasants would have a way to deal with those pesky boars and deer, who had been ravaging fields all along, oblivious to the world-historical drama of the Meiji Restoration going on around them.<sup>69</sup> But eventually the new state decided that the only peasants it wanted armed were those in its

11-12); Nishinakanojō-machi monjo H60-1-4- 1-73 (1865/11), Gunma Prefectural Archives; Tsukakoshi Tokutarō-ke monjo H1-78-1 1-36 (n.d. [1865]), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>65</sup>Yamada Mitsutoshi-ke monjo H60-10-4 2-76 (1865/6/4); on shooting to kill: Harasawa Shōichi-ke monjo H60-12-1 1-42 (*ushi* [1865]/i.5/*misoka*), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>66</sup>Abe, *Kinsei nōson chiiki shakaishi no kenkyū*, 114–150.

<sup>67</sup>Nishinakanojō-machi monjo H60-1-4- 1-111 (1868/8).

<sup>68</sup>Inari kuyū monjo H16-3-11 1-5 (1868/4), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>69</sup>Sakamoto Keizō-ke monjo P8202-1017 (1870/3/10), Gunma Prefectural Archives.



conscript army: by about 1876 tight restrictions had been placed on the private ownership of firearms. A modest number of professional hunters were still able to obtain weapons, but farmers were left to deal with pests as best they could without guns.<sup>70</sup>

## Coda

As the shogunate lay on its deathbed in 1866, an official in Edo took time from watching the regime implode to draft a cranky memo to the villages of the Kantō. He had heard reports that people were shooting at birds. What an outrage. As everyone knows, the only reason peasants have guns is to scare away animals that damage mountain fields. To be sure, one might on occasion be forced by circumstances to kill an animal in defence of one's farmland, but there is never an excuse to shoot at birds, especially the shogun's august falcons. The official was referring to the shogunal falconry grounds, which by that time had not been used regularly for hunting for a century and a half, but which nonetheless remained special 'no-shoot zones', where raptors and their prey – cranes and waterfowl – were protected.<sup>71</sup>

Two years later, some other official – or, who knows, maybe the same official – took time from watching the newborn Meiji regime fight for its life in a civil war to draft another memo to the villages of the Kantō. It said that signposts in place throughout the region from the third month of 1721 to the third month of 1868 have strictly prohibited the discharging of firearms in the shogunal falconry grounds and have called for the prompt capture of anyone guilty of killing birds. Those signposts may now come down.<sup>72</sup>

Even as guns were transformed from farm implements into instruments of violence borne by peasant vigilantes and bad guys, village troops and xenophobic rebels, they remained tied to an enduring institutional structure. Shoot all the masterless samurai you want, but keep your sights off that falcon. Until one day it didn't matter. Go ahead, shoot the damned falcon: there's no shogun left to care anymore.

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<sup>70</sup>*Gunma-ken futatsu zensho 1: Meiji rokunen* (n.p., 1879), leaves 18–19, Gunma Prefectural Archives; *Gunma-ken futatsu zensho 4: Meiji kyūnen* (n.p. 1879), leaves 14–15, Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>71</sup>Memorandum transcribed in Yokochi Teisaburō-ke monjo H0-2-1-③ ②-258 (1866), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

<sup>72</sup>Hagiwara Mitsuru-ke monjo P8305-74 (1868/3), Gunma Prefectural Archives.

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